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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that problems faced by many youngsters and families, such as poverty, inadequate housing, and poor health care and nutrition, are interrelated in complex ways. These problems are often inadequately addressed because of flaws in the social service delivery system. These flaws include a lack of communication between public and private agencies, difficulties experienced by specialized agencies in crafting comprehensive solutions, and insufficient funding. Efforts to fashion a profamily system of service delivery have emerged. Such a profamily system must be: comprehensive; preventive; family-centered; integrated; responsive to families' developmental needs; flexible; sensitive to cultural, gender, and racial concerns; and measured by outcomes for families and children, not by the number of services delivered. Initiatives to change service delivery systems are effective when they: link families to schools; are rooted in the local community; experiment with designing and delivering services; are driven by data from community profiles; and are financially pragmatic. Guidelines for ensuring the success of interagency collaborations include: (1) involving all key players; (2) ensuring visionary leadership; (3) establishing the expected outcomes for families and children; (4) ensuring commitment to change from all levels of member organizations and among community members; (5) establishing communication and decision making processes; and (6) encouraging member agencies to include collaborative goals in their institutional mandates. (BC)

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Collaboration: The Prerequisite for School Readiness and Success

By Linda G. Kunesh and Joanne Farley

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Each day in the U.S., hundreds of thousands of youngsters and their families face a multitude of problems associated with poverty, inadequate housing, poor health care and nutrition, difficulty in school, substance abuse, and neighborhood violence. Research indicates that these problems are interrelated at a variety of levels and in complex ways. Children and families at risk of one problem are increasingly at risk for a number of other problems, so much so that it often is difficult to distinguish between problem domains. To the extent that the dynamics of individual and social problems are interrelated, it makes sense that solutions to these problems must also be integrated and multidimensional.

Problems With the Current Service Delivery System

Melaville and Blank (1991) discuss several critical flaws of the current service delivery system. Most services are crisis-oriented. The social welfare system divides problems of children and families into rigid and distinct categories that fail to reflect the interrelated causes and solutions of the problems. There is a lack of functional communication between public and private sector agencies. Specialized agencies have difficulty crafting comprehensive solutions to complex problems. And finally, services are insufficiently funded.

From the perspective of families, the services they need are often not available or not easily accessed. Further, some services are unacceptable to families who must use them because the services focus on family weaknesses and problems rather than family strengths. Teachers, social workers, nurse practitioners, and other "frontline workers" who deal directly with families also fault the system. They are frustrated that youngsters come to school with problems that interfere with learning, and they acknowledge they are overburdened by high caseloads and constrained by strict rules that control who they can work with, for how long, and what services they can offer.

Awareness of the problems of the service delivery systems is growing at the state and national levels, as policymakers search for methods to encourage coherent and comprehensive solutions to the problems of children and families. Indeed, the National Task Force on School Readiness recently redefined *school readiness* to more realistically reflect the complexity and interrelatedness of forces that shape the development of young children. The National Task Force recognizes that school readiness is more than academic knowledge and skills. Readiness also requires that children reach and maintain certain levels of good health, self-confidence, and social competence. Readiness is not determined solely by the innate abilities and capacities of young children; rather, people and environments help shape children's readiness. The task force acknowledges that school readiness is not solely determined by the quality of early childhood programs; it also depends on the expectations and capacities of elementary schools. Finally, the task force emphasizes that the healthy development of children in all areas is not solely the responsibility of parents, but should include whole communities that have a stake in the healthy development of children and families. Clearly, the National Task force on School Readiness accepts the fact that all sectors in a child's life—family, school, and community—play important roles in determining whether the child will be successful (National Task Force on School Readiness, 1991).

Changing Direction Toward a "Profamily System"

With the growing recognition that everyone plays a part in the success (or failure) of children and families, new efforts to change the delivery of educational and human services have emerged. According to the School-Linked Integrated Services Study Group, which is sponsored by the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, collaboration is required to fashion a new profamily system—one that expands the capacity of helping institutions and crisis-intervention and treatment services to work together. This system must create new working relationships, operating assumptions, and high quality services that support families and help them reach their potential. While specifics of such a system will vary according to the needs of each community, the availability of resources, and the stage of development, a profamily system must always be:

- *Comprehensive.* A variety of opportunities and services respond to the full range of child and family needs.
- *Preventive.* The bulk of resources are provided at the front end to prevent problems, rather than at the back end for more costly crisis intervention and treatment services.
- *Family-centered and family-driven.* The system meets the needs of whole families, not just individuals, and assumes every family has strengths. Families have a major voice in setting goals and deciding what services they need to meet them. Service delivery features, such as hours and location, serve family needs, rather than institutional preferences.
- *Integrated.* Separate services are connected by common intake, eligibility determination, and individual family service planning, so that each family's range of needs is addressed.
- *Developmental.* Assessments and plans are responsive to families' changing needs.
- *Flexible.* Frontline workers respond quickly to family needs, and waivers are available to address or prevent emergencies.
- *Sensitive to cultural, gender, and racial concerns.* Respect for differences is formalized in systemwide policy statements,

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carried out in staff development activities, and reflected in the diversity of governing boards and staff.

- *Outcomes-oriented.* Performance is measured by improved outcomes for children and families, not by the number and kind of services delivered (Melaville, Blank, and Asayesh, 1993).

Characteristics of Effective Initiatives to Change Service Delivery Systems

Throughout the country, in large cities and small rural areas, many communities and counties have formed collaboratives and begun initiatives to create more responsive services for children and families. While none has fully implemented a community-wide profamily system, their combined efforts suggest that effective service integration initiatives have several characteristics in common. They are "school-linked," providing services and programs for children and families from a school or group of schools. School staff, along with personnel in other agencies, are involved in planning, operating, and governing the initiatives. Effective initiatives are rooted in the community and closely connected to state government, having the backing and involvement of those who use their services, those who provide them, and those who help pay for them. Effective initiatives experiment with designing and delivering needed services tailored to target populations or neighborhoods before expanding. They are data-driven, using comprehensive community profiles that are developed to establish baseline indicators showing how well children and families are faring, how well services are meeting family needs, and where gaps in services exist. Effective initiatives are financially pragmatic, fully using existing resources. External support is primarily used for planning and to provide enough financial stability to ensure that pilot efforts point toward systemwide policy changes.

Guidelines for Effective Collaboration

Many factors influence the success of interagency collaborations. No two collaboratives progress in exactly the same way or in the same time frame. In the final analysis, each interagency effort must proceed in a way that is consistent with its unique circumstances and composition. Nevertheless, the literature on collaboration offers some guidelines that have wide applicability:

- Involve all key players so that collaborative decisions and activities receive widespread support and recognition.
- Ensure that the collaborative has leadership that is visionary, willing to take risks, and facilitates change.
- Establish a shared vision of how the collaborative should progress and of the expected outcomes for children and families served by the collaborative partners.
- Build ownership at all levels. Commitment to change must be mobilized at all organizational levels of member agencies and among community members involved in the collaborative.
- Establish communication and decisionmaking processes that recognize disagreement among actors as a part of the process and establish ways to deal with conflict constructively.
- Institutionalize change by encouraging member agencies to include collaborative goals in their institutional mandates and by earmarking funds for collaborative activities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, remember that change begins with individuals, not institutions. Agency representatives must be allowed to take time from routine responsibilities to meet and interact with each other so that trust and respect on an individual level can be generated. It is through personal interactions that the trusting relationships across agencies that sustain the growing pains associated with systemic change are nurtured.

Clearly, the road to successful school readiness involves a new vision that encompasses not only children and their environments, but the roles schools, communities, and service agencies must play in the healthy development of children and their families. The process of raising and educating healthy children who are able to succeed in society requires new strategies for communitywide commitment to addressing the needs of the whole child.

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